

Maurice Beaumont Oral History Recording Transcription

This is Lorraine Simpson, it's 11 August at 3.40 in the afternoon and I am interviewing Maurice Beaumont for the Kirkgate Calling Oral History Project.

So, Maurice, can you tell me where you were born?

I was born on Doncaster Road in Wakefield in Heathfield Lodge in 1928.

And is Heathfield Lodge still standing?

It is, yes. It's at the top of the hill coming up from Agbrigg corner on the left hand side.

What can you remember about growing up there? Do you have fond memories?

Yes really, yes I'm sure. No reason to have any other. We were, I suppose, in a way a rather privileged family in the local standards. There was a lot of poverty at that time.

In Belle Vue, where you lived?

Yes, well everywhere really. But it was a time when, if you had any money at all, you were very lucky. And it made a lot of difference, of course, to life. It always does. So I consider really that we were very fortunate. As children.

Can you remember what the neighbourhood was like? What the area around the house was like as you were growing up?

Yes I can. Well, we naturally accepted it, you know. We had a garden and we played about and made bonfires, generally did the things that children do.

What about your neighbours, what were they like?

As such, we didn't have any neighbours. There were people next door, that was at School? House, but of course they were older people and they had two children. Peace, they called them. And Mr Peace worked for a butchers in Wakefield, and used to bring dye home, food dye, with which we dyed eggs at Easter, and we thought it was marvelous to have a red egg! It was the stuff they used for paloni, I suppose. And Victor was older than me. I can't remember really what happened to him, I think he led a bit of a shady life when he got older. But they were ordinary, mediocre people.

Were there any specific characters in the neighbourhood, you know, that everybody knew?

Oh, there were, yes. There were some people there – there was an area called Burnley Buildings, which was a series of um, houses, terraced houses. One up one down, I suppose in a way, they were. They were back to back, they might have been back to back. I don't know whether they had a front and back door, they may have had. But anyway, they were terraces and there were some people there who were comical and we used to think it was very exciting when they used to have rows, they'd be trailing about in the street shouting and ganging up and of course children would be standing there absolutely mystified at this sort of behaviour. We thought it was funny, you see. And took advantage of it. But there weren't a lot of folks, they were called Blackburn, that particular family, and again, they were odd. They looked as if they could have been immigrants, from some far European country. Mrs Blackburn had the appearance of someone who came from somewhere like Rumania or somewhere of that sort, small and dumpy, but I never knew them other than to know them when they were in action in the street.

Did you go to school close by?

No, we went to Sandal Council school which was, well I think it's the, I don't know the school – it's still there. Well it's been knocked down and rebuilt – it's near the Duke of York on Belle Vue Road, that's where we went until we got to ten I should think and then I went to the grammar school.

Have you got happy memories of your school?

Yes, really. I mean I was never a star pupil. But nevertheless we were never pressured into performance, you know, there was no question of oh, why haven't you done better, or why haven't you got more marks, or whatever it was. Nobody seemed to bother, except if you (unintell).

What were your favourite subjects?

Later on, chemistry, yes that was my favourite, my favourite subject, chemistry and physics were the things I liked more, I think, I should have been a chemist, maybe.

What about Wakefield itself, you must have seen a lot of change in Wakefield?

Yes, and not much of it for the better really.

What was it like when you first – first memories?

It was a lovely town really when we were small. Of course there was a lot of slum property of which we weren't conscious as children. Kirkgate, I mean, there were all the yards off both sides of Kirkgate and I think about the um, I've often said if Wakefield Corporation had had anything to do with York there wouldn't have been anything left of it at all. Because they would have destroyed everything. You know, they never thought about preserving any of this, what to them was terrible property, and I suppose it was but people were living in it.

What were the yards like, can you remember? Were they residential, did people live there?

Oh yes, they did but you see they went off, the shops and what not that were by the side of say Kirkgate, from Kirkgate Station area up towards what would eventually go into the Bullring (unintell), there were archways every so far, this was where these yards went off and they went off I suppose in terraces of, well, they'd be slums I suppose really.

Terraces on either side of the yard?

Yes and they'd have a bit of a paved area, I suppose, where they hung washing out or whatever they did. I cannot really remember those particularly. I know that they were there because the yards were there, they'd knocked them down in the late thirties. And hence, estates like Eastmoor which was occupied, I think, by the people who had lived in Kirkgate. They moved from the slums in Kirkgate into these modern corporation houses but whether they were happy or not, I suppose they'd think it was marvelous at the time because they wouldn't have any running water probably, or if they had running water it would be only a cold tap. And there'd be, um most of them would only have gas light – it's hard to believe. And yet there were people, you know, they'd laugh and say they were happy. You have to say yes, I suppose, in the main, they were. They hadn't the desire to get out of their social status. I mean, they knew that was what they were able to afford, and that was it, I mean there used to be the lodging house in Pincheon Street and at that time the old tinker and his wife used to come trundling round. She always wore a man's mac and a flat cap and she was a queer old stick really. And the tinker himself was much like the Kaiser, er Willy – Prince Willy of Heck or wherever it was. And he used of have this waxed moustache which I suppose he's done cause he would have realized that he would and get dressed up and they used to come to my grandmother's and get a bit of bay because he used to use it to dye his moustache. That's what they did with it.

Can you remember Kirkgate before the big Marsh Way roundabout?

Oh, lord, yes.

What was it like, did it stretch all the way?

Yes, because there were shops, more or less all the way.

So a continuous road?

Yes. It used to start at the, when you went through the left er, railway bridge, you know, from Kirkgate Station. On the left hand side I think it was the pub called The Leopard. There were endless pubs. Endless, every two or three yards there was another pub. Along the opposite side there were the railway offices, I don't know to whom they belonged, they belonged to the I suppose it would be the LMS I suppose at that time or L and, Lancashire and Yorkshire probably, going back earlier. But after that, I think, it's William Street, and you turned up there and went towards the station. The Wakefield Arms was a famous pub where later on there was music and it's famous for rocking and rolling but that's a wreck today. And then, after that there was probably a bit of waste ground and then another street and then it started with a confectioners and there were endless shops there, the butchers, Jowett'sss butchers and another confectionary business was next door to them and then the Co-operative Society had a place there and eventually it went on to the bottom of Lathe? Street. And on, there were Sheard's greengrocer's shop on that corner and on the opposite side of the road from there was the six chimneys which was an Elizabethan building and one or two, a little twine shop – you can't imagine you could make a living out of twine, could you? But they sold string, and perhaps rope and other things. That belonged to the six chimneys itself which was half timbered and belonged to some people called Hammond and Wakefield Corporation I think, were probably thinking that they'd like to buy it but Mr Hammond wouldn't sell it for the price that they obviously either could or wanted to pay. And eventually the whole thing collapsed! And there was only just the ground floor and there was a dog, during the war it sold dog meat, of all things. They used to have a bicycle shop in the basement before it's demise. But it was a pity. It was one of the, that was the jewel of Wakefield, it would and should have been preserved. But they're short sighted, penny pinching and 'Oh we're not paying that!' You know. He won't have paid much for it in the first place so you're not going to profiteer out of Wakefield Corporation. And so they'd rather let it fall down.

What about Kirkgate Station itself – was that well used?

Very. Very well used. When we were children that was a principle holiday station, you know, because children being only interested in holidays and pleasure, but trains to both and east and west coast went from there because it was the (intell) Lancashire and Yorkshire railways originally and yes, it's hard to believe how it had deteriorated, how it was allowed to go. People dreaded having to go to it because of the underpass and it's associated criminal elements. Women certainly wouldn't have wanted to go there in the evening. Well, unless they were accompanied by some tough guardians.

What about the station itself – did it have buildings on the platforms, waiting rooms or anything like that?

Ooh yes! It would have dining facilities, you know, they'd be making food there and I mean it was a busy station and it had a big signal box on the station itself built into the structure. Quite unusual really. Because underneath where you were walking there was this bay window, a long window, where all the signals were operated from because mainly they weren't electric in those days, it was all done by cable so they had to have levers and a pulley and tugging at them. And of course there was a lot of goods, a lot of goods were transported by rail, it's quite amazing that they're not today.

I mean, there used to be the old dray came, the horse, the dray cam with heavy, what they were classed as, goods. And there was the stuff that came by passenger train, parcels, you know, things for general commerce. It's hard to understand why that's not used now, but of course, there aren't the trains. I mean I believe I'm right in saying that during the First World War you could go from Wakefield Kirkgate to Manchester in an hour, and I also think I'm right in saying that it's never been possible since. Since the First World War. You could never, even in say the thirties, you could never go as quickly as you could for the first ten years or so of the century.

I wonder why that was?

I don't know, it's hard to imagine. It must be, you can't say lack of demand because there would be obviously demand, but you see, even now you can't go directly to Manchester from Wakefield you have to go to Leeds or Dewsbury I think, then you can get on the Leeds to Manchester train.

When you said you went on holiday from there, what kind of places did you get to?

Bridlington, principally. Because we were very attached to Bridlington. I don't really know why apart from the fact we were fortunate enough to know the people who owned the pleasure boats there and consequently could ride on them free of charge for as long as we liked. And so that would be an attraction in those times, when you think, it didn't cost anything. It was looked upon very favourably.

It must have been very exciting getting on the train at Wakefield and then getting off at the seaside?

It was. Yes, it was. I think one of the most exciting things and you can still experience it if you go to somewhere where there is live steam trains, is this smell of steam and heat and oil, and there's something about that mixture which defies belief. And it's the same thing if you go to a traction engine rally, the same mixture again – you get near any of those traction engines when they are fired up and there's this aroma, which I can't describe, but it's magical. And it's a thing of youth. We really loved it.

What were the trains like, were they in carriages, compartments?

In the main probably. They were comfy because they were nicely upholstered most of them with chenille upholstery and slam? doors, of course, and a lot of them in the really old days, didn't have corridors which was a bit of a thing if you got people with weak bladders, well, they were in trouble! To be quite honest. And then of course (unintell) trains came in but I think they mostly had by the time we were going on holiday and then of course cars came in so that spoilt that because then we didn't go by rail, we'd go by car which was pleasant and you saw a lot of places. Had a lot of experiences. And we enjoyed it.

Did the whole family go?

Yes, generally, yes. Or we'd go and my father, would have breakfast at the Portobello Hotel which was a residential place at that time; it's hard to think again, that doesn't even exist, it's been pulled down. And you wouldn't have thought that was possible. I believe I'm right in saying it had a snooker room, a billiard room and at that time was a big place.

Where was that?

That was on Portobello Road and of course my father was at the mill in Portobello Road and we used to enjoy going there, particularly when it was getting near Bonfire Night and you wanted 'touch'. I don't think you know what 'touch' is. Well, it's oily rope, really that accumulates in mills and you could light it and it would glow, it would burn but not quickly and so you'd got something to

light your fireworks with. That's why it was called touch because you'd only to touch the thing glowing itself and fizzing. Yes, we used to like going down there.

You sound like you've got happy memories of Wakefield?

Yes, indeed. Very. Very happy, I mean I think it had everything, theatres, particularly in the earlier days. Because in Kirkgate, next door but not quite next door but almost next to the six chimneys was the Empire which was originally a theatre and that was a very comfy, a comfy place. I'm trying to think who laid the foundation stone there.

Was it somebody famous?

It was some famous star or other at the time. I would have thought I could have told you who it was because I must have read the thing thousands and thousands of times. But it was very nice and then of course it stopped being a music theatre and became a cinema. And then that was followed by the Regal which I think opened in about 1938 or 9; that was very modern but big, a big cinema.

Still on Kirkgate?

Still on Kirkgate, yes. On the corner of Sun Lane. And that then went up to the swimming baths which opened in about 1937 I should think. The new baths, they superceded the baths on Almshouse Lane which were then sort of downgraded for use by schools. Schools used to go to Almshouse Lane, it was good enough for them. (Laughs). You could swim in it, most of us learned to swim there but I'm not sure whether I did. I think I eventually learned to swim at Sun Lane. But it was more what you did yourself than anything else. I don't remember being taught actually. You worked on the principle that if you sank that wouldn't be very good and if you could swim underwater, I remember swimming underwater then thinking well, what am I doing – if you can swim underwater you can swim on top! Which of course is true. Once you'd learned that, of course, you'd cracked it.

Well thank you very much, that's been really interesting. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to tell me about Wakefield Kirkgate in particular or Belle Vue even?

No, I don't think there is. I don't think so. I mean there were – people were poor, that's the thing you remembered from those times. They were poor and yet they managed to maintain, in the main, I'm not saying that it was universal, but in the main they maintained a reasonable sense of behaviour; most of them were honest. There were some very, very nice people. Regent Street in Belle Vue was one of the principle residential streets in the city.

Which is Regent Street?

Regent Street is on the right hand side coming out of town. There's Denmark Street and Regent Street and then you would come then to the area where the Palace Cinema was, that was on Bread Street and that was a place that was built about 1920 something like that. Think it belonged to some people called Askew. A family of Askews who, the father had the cinema and the rest of them worked in it. A bit of a, a bit of what you'd have said was a flea pit. It didn't have the attraction of the Wakefield city cinemas but during the war, during the last war, it was very well patronized indeed because of course people were looking for somewhere to go out for a bit of fun and near at home they hadn't to, they weren't miles away because the buses maybe didn't run late enough at night to be going, perhaps coming back from town. But going back to Regent Street it was a place that had a lot of very, very respectable people living on it. I can't just go into the names.

It's interesting to hear how it once was though?

Yes, it was, yes, it is, it's strange how it's gone. Some of the property was smallish but some of them were big, biggish houses and that went up eventually to May Bush which is where Dr Downey lived when we were small. (Unintell) and that went straight through onto Agbrigg Road. Their private drive had access both ways which would be very handy for a doctor when they were wanting to go on their rounds. But, yes, it's hard to believe the changes and how areas come and go.

In popularity?

In popularity yes. Now, they think if it's not Sandal it's not worth considering but it wasn't so then. There were a lot of people who'd got a lot of money but it wasn't apparent, they didn't show it as they would today. They'd have to be splashing out on exotic holidays. Just watching some bird or other there, I think it's landed somewhere down here. I realize that I'm still being recorded (laughs).

Thank you that's been absolutely fascinating.

It's been a pleasure and I hope it's of interest to you.